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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 05 DAMASCUS 000126

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SUBJECT: REFORMATTED COPY OF DAMASCUS 125 - RE-ENGAGING

SYRIA: SYRIA AND LEBANON

REF: A. DAMASCUS 94
[1](#)B. PARIS 135
[1](#)C. 08 DAMASCUS 526
[1](#)D. 08 BEIRUT 1542
[1](#)E. BEIRUT 129
[1](#)F. DAMASCUS 77
[1](#)G. BEIRUT 155

Classified By: CDA Maura Connelly, reasons 1.5 b and d.

[1](#)1. (S/NF) Summary: Direct U.S. engagement with Syria is unlikely to yield near-term breakthroughs in Syrian-Lebanese relations, but a U.S.-Syrian dialogue provides an opportunity to cooperate with France and other European countries to ensure Syria hears a more consistent message on the importance of taking concrete steps to improve relations with Lebanon. From a Syrian perspective, the last 12 months produced watershed advances in relations with Lebanon; to take one example, the once unthinkable existence of a Syrian Embassy in Beirut is now a reality. Syrian contacts urge Washington to recognize this step as positive, even if the appointment of Syria's ambassador remains pending. Doing so, they argue, would help to create an atmosphere that would make it easier for the SARG to take additional steps. While a constructive U.S. tone might be useful, we should understand that the SARG will almost certainly spin any positive U.S. message on Lebanon to downplay differences between Washington and Damascus, probably to the detriment of March 14's electoral campaign.

[1](#)2. (S/NF) Summary continued: At least initially, the U.S. should expect Syrian counterparts to deny claims that Damascus is slow-rolling normalization of diplomatic relations, reject accusations of Syrian interference in Lebanon's internal affairs, and assert Syria's sovereign legal jurisdiction over any of its citizens asked to deal with the Special Tribunal for Lebanon. "We are out of Lebanon," FM Muallim recently told Codel Smith, as if to say there was little left to discuss (Ref A). At the end of the day, we assess Syrian decision-makers view Lebanon principally as a security issue. Syria's relationship with Hizballah provides a deterrent to Israeli military action and gives Syria bargaining leverage in any future talks on the Golan. Syrian officials also remain concerned about ensuring the security and influence of Lebanese Alawites, countering the threat from extremist groups in Lebanon, and containing internal Lebanese political volatility. There are also

personal animosities at work, as Bashar and his inner circle continue to harbor grudges against March 14 leaders for urging the USG to increase pressure on the Syrian regime.
End Summary.

Give us Credit for What We've Done

¶3. (S/NF) Current SARG thinking about Lebanon, like Syrian thinking on most subjects, remains opaque at best. A number of Embassy contacts have indicated recently that Damascus is actively pursuing discussions with France and Turkey on proceeding with formalizing diplomatic relations with its western neighbor. "The thinking here has changed significantly in the past year," contends Dr. Hassan al-Nouri, a former Minister who runs one of Syria's only private business schools and told us he was short-listed as a candidate to be Syria's Ambassador to Lebanon. Nouri claims the decision to open an embassy was a "psychological milestone" for the Syrian government and public. "A year ago, diplomatic relations with Lebanon would have been impossible to imagine," al-Nouri asserted.

¶4. (S/NF) The difference now, Nouri continued, was that French influence on the SARG had empowered regime "moderates" to argue against "the old tactics" of aggressive intimidation, and in favor of influencing Lebanon through

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normal government-to-government channels. In this vein, Syria had hosted a number of Lebanese officials and would continue doing so. Asked why there had been no reciprocal visits by Syrian officials to Beirut, Nouri replied he had heard of no problems on the Syrian side and wondered whether there were standing Lebanese invitations. There may be sensitivities among some Lebanese politicians about the optic of Syrians, particularly security service officials, coming to Beirut, Nouri speculated.

¶5. (S/NF) Nouri acknowledged Syria's past relationship with Lebanon had created a dark cloud of distrust between the two governments. Nonetheless, he argued, "the direction is positive for the first time in decades." Presidents Asad and Sleiman had established a very positive working relationship and set a constructive tone for their two governments. Nouri urged Washington to "learn a lesson from the French" and praise the Syrian regime when it did something positive. "For the last eight years," Nouri observed, "Damascus has heard nothing but negative messages" from Washington. Syria had opened an embassy in Beirut, and what was Washington's response? "Not good enough," he answered.

¶6. (S/NF) In response to arguments that Syria had yet to take concrete steps (e.g., assigning an ambassador to Lebanon, beginning the process of delineating borders, releasing Lebanese detainees, enhancing security cooperation, ending arms supplies to Hizballah) to suggest that the Syrian government now viewed Lebanon as a sovereign and independent entity, Nouri conceded that Bashar had not fulfilled his pledge to appoint an ambassador to Lebanon by the end of ¶2008. But French President Sarkozy was not publicly scolding the Syrian regime; instead France remained focused on the "seventy percent" of commitments it claimed the SARG had implemented. (Note: Ref B, "Why Sarkozy Thinks Engaging Syria is Working," provides a French assessment of Syrian deliverables that include, inter alia, Syrian support for the conclusion of the Doha Accord that facilitated the election of President Sleiman; the release of one or more Syrian political prisoners; the establishment of formal Syrian-Lebanese diplomatic relations during President Sleiman's August 14 visit to Damascus; an improved tone in high level meetings between SARG and GOL officials; and a

Syrian invitation to France and the U.S. to co-sponsor direct Syrian-Israeli peace talks when both parties are ready.)

¶17. (S/NF) Moreover, Nouri said, the French recognized that not all of the blame lay with Syria. The GOL's inability to reach the necessary consensus in its Council of Ministers regarding some policy issues involving Syria was also a factor in explaining why there had not been more progress in deepening bilateral relations. Washington, he concluded, could better advance its objectives if it took positive note of Syria's willingness to recognize Lebanon's sovereignty. "You can push us to do more, but no one here wants to listen unless we get credit for what we've already done," he declared.

The Syrian-Lebanese Higher Council

¶18. (S/NF) Nasri al-Khoury, Secretary General of the Syrian-Lebanese Higher Council, told us this week that there had been substantial progress by both sides since President Sleiman's "historic" August 2008 visit to Damascus, particularly in security cooperation. Khoury reported that Lebanese Defense Minister Elias Murr's January 28 visit had produced agreement on the establishment of nearly 400 border monitoring posts, with 300 to be manned by Syrian security personnel and the remainder to be staffed by Lebanese. (This information tracks with Embassy Beirut's reporting in Ref E).

¶19. (S/NF) In addition, Khoury reported plans for additional ministerial-level meetings to address security, cultural, economic, educational, and other issues affecting bilateral issues. Khoury acknowledged there had been little progress

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on border delineation. Syria's position, he said, gave priority to border demarcation with Jordan, which had been under discussion for a long time. Syria had rejected the idea of starting with delineation of the border around Shebba Farms, arguing that the area remained under Israeli occupation. Meanwhile, the re-constitution of the bilateral committee created originally in the 1940s to discuss border delineation had been hopelessly mired on both sides by trying to find suitable replacements for the members who had died or were unable to resume their work. (Note: We understand the GOL has nominated its commission members and has formally informed the SARG of its readiness to begin work. Vice FM Miqdad told President Carter in December that he was the designated representative to the bilateral committee. However, because Syria had already begun to delineate the Syrian/Jordanian border, a shortage of experts would prevent Syria from turning its attention to the Syrian/Lebanese border "anytime soon." End Note.)

¶10. (S/NF) Khoury argued on balance that Syria had made important gestures during 2008 that signaled its desire for moving toward more normal relations with Lebanon. "Last year, Lebanon lacked a President, its Parliament was chained shut, and Hizballah nearly took over the whole country," he observed. "Would you prefer then to now?" he mused.

¶11. (C) BACKGROUND NOTE ON THE HIGHER COUNCIL: Refs C and D provide background on the controversial Syrian-Lebanese Higher Council, whose future remains uncertain. Khoury is a Lebanese national whom many Lebanese, particularly March 14 supporters, view as "pro-Syrian." He heads an organization that oversees the implementation of some 22 bilateral agreements, some of which date back to the early 1990s, covering trade, energy, water, education, agriculture, labor, customs, migration, and cultural relations, among other subjects. As Ref G notes, many Lebanese view the Council as mechanism of Syrian patronage over Lebanon, but there is general agreement in Lebanon and Syria that now is not the time to address the Council's future. Syrians, by

comparison, point out that the Council's agreements on water, electricity, and other subjects benefit Lebanon far more than Syria; they would favorably view restructuring or replacing the Council in a way that produced more equitable agreements in these areas. END BACKGROUND NOTE.

"We're Out of Lebanon"

¶12. (S/NF) Samir al-Taqi, informal MFA advisor and Director of the Orient Center, told us in late January (ref F) Syrian FM Muallim was walking a fine line between advancing Syria's diplomatic relationship with Lebanon and fending off concerns from security service advisors and VP Shara'a, who were complaining that Syria had humiliated itself by going "too far" in bowing to Lebanese demands. Muallim was the principal SARG official responsible for the Lebanon file, but he had encountered significant resistance from Shara'a in positively responding to French and Lebanese complaints that the Syrians were blocking the normalization of diplomatic relations. At the moment, French officials had shifted their focus from Lebanon to Gaza-related issues, al-Taqi reported. Muallim was using this lull to tout Syria's accomplishments in improving ties to Lebanon while working to resolve the internal SARG deadlock over naming an ambassador to Lebanon. The issues related to Lebanese detainees fell primarily under the purview of the security services, al-Taqi reported, noting there were claims by Syrian officials that Lebanon, in fact, held more Syrian detainees than vice-versa. Asked why Syria would not open a dialogue on the issue, al-Taqi replied the SARG was in all likelihood holding up this discussion and any further deliverables until it could better gauge Washington's seriousness in re-establishing dialogue.

¶13. (S/NF) Al-Taqi was more upbeat about the overall SARG outlook toward Lebanon. While Syria's 2005 military

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withdrawal had been "humiliating" for Bashar, Syria had recovered and had benefited from the experience. The development and growth of Syria's private banking sector was one positive consequence, he said. Now, there were few if any Syrians who advocated a return of Syrian troops into Lebanon. In fact, he added, one consequence of President Sleiman's ongoing communication with President Asad was better counter-terrorism and security cooperation.

¶14. (S/NF) Elaborating on how Bashar's inner circle tended to define Syria's interests in Lebanon, al-Taqi explained that Syrian security officials viewed Lebanon principally in terms of preventing Israel from using Lebanon as a platform to attack Syria. Almost all of Asad's advisors agreed on the potential danger stemming from the proliferation of al-Qaeda affiliated groups that pose a threat to Syria as well as Lebanon. Syria had shifted some 200 border guards to the Lebanese border in October 2008 and there had been close coordination between the Lebanese and Syrian security services since then, al-Taqi claimed. In addition, the SARG continued to view protecting Lebanon's Alawite minority as an important objective.

¶15. (S/NF) Still, warned al-Taqi, many Syrian officials looked suspiciously at March 14 leaders, particularly those who had sought to influence the U.S. to increase pressure on Syria. Some senior advisors believed the March 14 majority government "uses you (the U.S.) as a weapon against us," al-Taqi groused. The "political cement" that unified March 14 was antipathy towards Syria, al-Taqi observed. Consequently, there would be "few tears shed" in Damascus if March 14 failed to win another majority in the June 2009 elections. At the same time, some players inside the Syrian regime were now more acutely aware that any sudden shifts of

power within Lebanon could result in instability. Given Syria's interest in avoiding a "confessional implosion" or a sudden surge by one party, as occurred in May 2008, when Hizballah briefly took control of large parts of Beirut, there was growing recognition within the SARG that the election of a strong March 8 majority could produce Lebanese and international backlash against Syria, al-Taqi claimed. "Lebanese politics is always complicated," al-Taqi said, arguing a convincing victory by either March 8 or March 14 could produce more problems for Lebanon's neighbors.

¶16. (S/NF) In any future U.S.-Syrian discussions on Lebanon, Al-Taqi predicted President Asad and FM Muallim would claim Syria's responsibilities for the state of Lebanese internal affairs ended when Syrian troops withdrew in 2005. Al-Taqi advised that sensitive issues, such as Lebanese detainees, will require time; border demarcation, especially around the Israeli-occupied territories of Shebba Farms, will have to wait for significant progress in Syrian-Israel peace negotiations before Syria would feel confident enough to address this issue seriously.

Comment

¶17. (S/NF) We concur with Embassy Beirut's Ref G assessment that Syria has failed to deliver on significant issues such as assigning an ambassador, demarcating borders, and addressing Lebanese detainees. On the other hand, the current situation represents a marked improvement over that of a year ago and offers a basis on which we can build. Though U.S. engagement with Damascus on Lebanon and other issues is unlikely to alter Syria's propensity for dispensing deliverables with an eyedropper, we can use such a dialogue to register our concerns and convey our expectations clearly. Coordinating with France and other countries offers an opportunity to close ranks and prevent Syria from playing different parties off one another. A joint approach may also increase chances for developing a widely-supported package of

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incentives and disincentives linked to specific Syrian behavior, which over time should be more effective than simply talking to Syria on our own.

¶18. (S/NF) Damascus will almost certainly seek to spin any U.S. engagement policy as vindication of the Syrian regime's policies. While our acknowledgment of positive Syrian behavior toward Lebanon, such as establishing diplomatic relations, opening an embassy, and expanding security cooperation, could soften Syrian objections to taking more difficult steps over time, we expect the SARG would seek to pocket such a gesture and use it at March 14's expense. As a result, careful coordination of our public and private messaging to Syria, Lebanon, allies, and other audiences will be essential. While we will have a hard time penetrating the SARG-controlled media, we can use our overwhelming advantage in the international arena to ensure regional media have the right message.

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